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25425 & 20500: ZIP codes for a Revolution

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25425 & 20500: ZIP codes for a Revolution

Abstract

I put on my coat and headed out the door today around lunchtime. My excuse was to grab a sandwich to munch on at my desk, but I was really hunting something very different. The Post Office is right along High Street down the block from work and Tuesday was the first day they've been open this year. [*excerpt*]

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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25425 & 20500: ZIP codes for a Revolution

THURSDAY, JANUARY 3, 2013

I put on my coat and headed out the door today around lunchtime. My excuse was to grab a sandwich to munch on at my desk, but I was really hunting something very different. The Post Office is right along High Street down the block from work and Tuesday was the first day they've been open this year.

I went in and asked for two sheets of stamps. The clerk was kind and cheerful.

"Do you have any Emancipation stamps?" I asked.

"I hope we do," he answered, "We did before I went to lunch."



The quarry of my lunchtime chase.

He slid his hand into the drawer and pulled out a disheveled folder. Out popped two sheets of the new Emancipation Proclamation commemorative stamps. My heart raced.

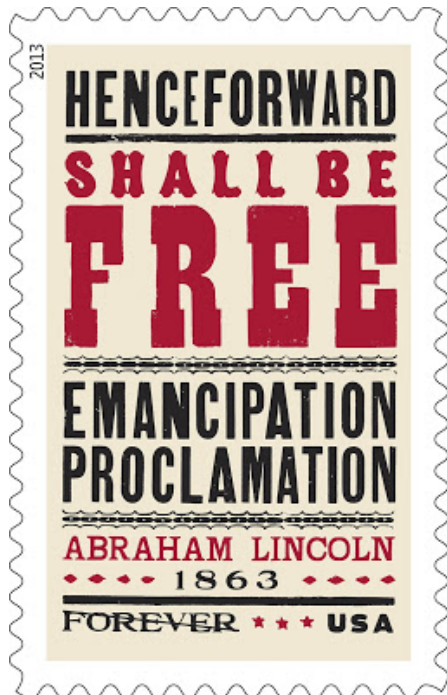
I know it sounds a bit lame, but it meant something to buy those stamps Wednesday. The fact that the stamps exist is an amazing thing. The document they commemorate is an amazing thing. And buying them on Wednesday, the 150th anniversary of the first full day that the Emancipation Proclamation was in effect was amazing.

But the most amazing thing was buying them at *that particular* post office.

I work in Harpers Ferry, ZIP code 25425. In 1859, John Brown's raid struck at the institution of slavery. Brown intended to raise an army of former slaves and march through the South bringing freedom to 4 million. And the United States Government saw him executed for his troubles.

But the document that stamp commemorated meant something different. In 1863, the United States Government, the same one that ensured Brown was captured and hanged, struck at the institution of slavery. That document raised an army of 100,000 former slaves and marched them through the South bringing freedom to 4 million.

The very land that the post office now sits upon was once a portion of the Contraband Camp and defensive network that ringed Harpers Ferry. The target of John Brown's hatred became a destination for John Brown's despised poor and the downtrodden race of the South. Modern-day ZIP code 25425 was transformed from slavery's stronghold to the home of first freedoms for thousands.



A closeup of the USPS' tribute to freedom.

That's a revolution, a complete inversion of the world's order in four short years.

It was a small moment that the postman didn't realize happened when he handed me the stamps. But my heart leapt. After he ran my debit card and I walked away from the counter, I stopped and read the stamps near the desk with passport applications and draft registration forms.

"Henceforward shall be free." Those words leap from the final Emancipation Proclamation. When Lincoln set his signature under those words, sitting in his office in modern-day ZIP code 20500, his hand trembled from shaking hands all morning. He was afraid that any tremors in the ink would betray reticence, so he signed deliberately. *He wanted the world to know he had no reticence.*

I was a little crestfallen. I much prefer the ring of Lincoln's Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation's triad of freedom: "then, thenceforward, and forever free." There is permanence in that promise & threat. Those words ring in a final, biblical way, like the dictum of a holy power.

My mind wandered to the stack of passport forms on the counter, then quickly to the pile of draft registration cards. The thought behind those two documents fundamentally changed when *that other document* saw Lincoln's trembling hand lay ink upon it in ZIP code 20500 back in January of 1863.

Black men could fight in earnest for their own freedoms after the Proclamation. They could be drafted and serve their nation after the Proclamation. They were firmly on an admittedly bumpy and slipshod path toward true citizenship after the Proclamation.

Then I glanced back at the stamps and saw it. These stamps don't have a denomination. They aren't 45¢ stamps, ready to send a First Class letter across the nation. They're *permanent* stamps.

Down in the bottom left corner is that simple word: Forever.

The Emancipation Proclamation is nothing short of an eternal revolution still continued today. And these stamps are relics of a revolution, purchased in the town where that revolution, at least in part, began.

So raise a glass to 25425! And to 20500 too! And toast a document that brings us all a measure of freedom.

In giving freedom to the slave, we ensure freedom to the free."

-A. Lincoln, 1 December 1862